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ABSTRACT

Most personality theories of the aging devote insufficient consideration to the social learning transpiring during the aging period and to the dynamics of the interaction between developmental and social forces. Erikson emphasized the formulation of a philosophical verdict on one's earlier experiences. Similarly, in Neugarten's version of the disengagement theory, primacy is given to developmental intrapsychic changes of middle age, with a secondary role reserved for the later social-factors affecting the elderly. According to the transactional model proposed here, the effects of the environment to which the elderly person is subject are the product of (1) the people and settings comprising that environment, and (2) the manner in which the individual (with his unique personality and cognitive make-up) acts upon and is acted upon by these people and settings. This dynamic interplay continues throughout the aging process. The model highlights the need for research in which present behavioral and environmental events assume as much importance as past ones. (Author)

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Beyond Despair and Disengagement: A Transactional Model of Personality

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In recent years personality theorists have been paying increasing attention to the aged, a segment of the population that had hitherto received scant study (Neugarten, 1973). Three of the dominant theoretical approaches -- ego analytical, disengagement, and symbolic-interactionist orientations -- though seemingly very disparate, all possess, to varying degrees one common shortcoming. That is, they all devote insufficient attention to the dynamics of the interaction between developmental and social forces which transpires during the aging period.

One representative of the ego analytical viewpoint is Erik Erikson, whose widely known theory deals with psychosocial stages of ego development throughout the person's life cycle (Elkind, 1971). Each of Erikson's eight stages of development revolves around a crisis facing the individual during that particular period, a crisis which can have a positive or negative outcome. As we are concerned with aging, we may focus on the final stage, where the outcomes posited by Erikson are integrity vs. despair (and disgust) (Erikson, 1959). A bit of the flavor of what

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Erikson means by integrity can be gleaned by citing two of the components of the quality, as defined by Erikson: "the acceptance of one's own and only life cycle . . . as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitution" and "a sense of comradeship with men and women of distant times and of different pursuits" (Erikson, 1959, p. 98). He who lacks this feeling of integrity is beset by despair; unsatisfied with the life he has led, he possesses no hope for constructing another one. What is most striking about this terminal Eriksonian stage is its qualitative difference from the previous seven periods. All of the earlier seven are rooted in present activity centering around contemporary happenings. Thus the infant begins to come to grips with feelings of trust or mistrust revolving around the maternal relationship. As a second example, we can observe the latency age youngster, who, released into the world of the neighborhood and the school, comes to develop a predominant sense of either industry or inferiority through his work and play. Furthermore, each of the first seven stages also looks ahead; the outcome of a given stage will have important consequences for the person's future. For instance, we might imagine that a baby who feels mistrust as a result of the feeding experience with mother would later generalize this feeling to others in his environment. Where the eighth stage differs is that, while it presents a present crisis for the individual, it is a crisis concerned with past events. The individual is putting his personal history in order so that he can face his impending death with some measure of equanimity and acceptance. Although the formulation of a personal, philo-

sophical verdict on one's life is probably a vital facet of successful aging, the Eriksonian account is an incomplete one due to its failure to address itself to the ongoing last reel of life.

The disengagement theory, advanced initially by Cumming and Henry in 1961, has received much attention in the past 14 years, with such writers as Maddox (1966), Rose (1964), and Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin (1968) criticizing it for: 1. asserting the inevitability of disengagement, 2. advocating disengagement as a desirable process for the elderly to experience, and 3. failing to adequately consider the social structure and cultural trends operating in any society. Neugarten and her colleagues (1968) have refined the disengagement theory by combining developmental and social psychological factors in explaining the process of aging. As summarized by Neugarten (1973), the updated theory consists of the following tenets: 1. There is a lessened amount of social interaction as one grows older; this decrease stems from withdrawal by society and by the person himself. 2. "Psychological disengagement seems to precede social disengagement and seems to have developmental properties" (p. 330). 3. The outcome of aging is dependent upon both the individual's personality type and the social situations in which he finds himself. "In short, disengagement proceeds at different rates and different patterns in different people in different places and has different outcomes with regard to psychological well-being" (p. 330).

According to Neugarten, the social withdrawal, described by the disengagement theory, which occurs in a person's 60's and

70's, is preceded by intrapsychic transformations resulting in increased interiority and passivity. These intrapsychic changes, as measured by projective techniques, are noticed by researchers as early as their subjects' 40's and 50's, and compose part of the personality which the middle-aged person carries with him as he nears old age. For Neugarten, these intrapsychic changes of middle age are developmental rather than "responsive" (her term) processes: "The findings indicated developmental . . . processes largely because age differences appeared well before the social losses of aging occurred and well before decrease in social interaction . . ." (p. 321). Such an interpretation of what constitutes social factors appears to be limited here to social losses; and since social losses don't occur until later in life, social factors can't be the cause of the intrapsychic changes discovered. This line of reasoning may be based on an overly narrow definition of social influences and provides, in my opinion, somewhat shaky support for a developmental interpretation of the data.

Thus the revised version of the disengagement theory would appear to be at best an interactional theory in which the individual and the environment both contribute to what happens to the person as he ages; at worst it is a developmental theory devoting insufficient consideration to the social learning which transpires during the aging period. Even at its best, however, the disengagement theory and its variants seem guilty of maintaining rather definite boundaries between developmental and social forces.

Symbolic interaction theorists (Becker, 1964; Rose, 1964) have attempted to correct what they perceive as an overemphasis

on developmental factors by stressing the importance of cultural history and interpersonal interactions in shaping adult behavior. For the interactionists, it is the effects of societal trends and social structures (rather than personality traits) that are crucial in determining the results of the interactions among the aging and between the aging and others. Such concepts are valuable in highlighting the impact of our institutions and systems on situational adjustment and human experience. However, they seem to excessively downplay the contribution of developmental forces, as well as the two-way nature of the relationship between society and the individual.

Searching for a more inclusive paradigm of personality than the ones just discussed, we can ironically find some suggestive thoughts in a model designed to account for the development of psychological deficits in children. Sameroff and Chandler (1974) offer a transactional model to elucidate what happens to infants victimized by prenatal and perinatal defects. In order for there to be psychological sequelae (e.g., retardation, hyperactivity, etc.) of such birth traumata, there must normally be, Sameroff and Chandler propose, an environment in which the child is provided with deleterious caretaking. This model emphasizes that "the child is . . . in a perpetual state of active re-organization and cannot be regarded as maintaining an inborn deficit as a static characteristic." The two components of the model are therefore "the plastic character of the environment and the organism as an active participant in its own growth."

Returning to the aged and extrapolating from the above

transactional schema, we may outline the following model for personality and social changes in the elderly: As he approaches old age, the individual possesses a constellation of personality traits (or patterns of responses, as a behaviorist would put it) -- a constellation which is the result of both biological and psychosocial influences. In the beginning of the aging period (admittedly an arbitrary and artificial demarcation), the individual is subject to the effects of the persons and settings in which he finds himself. The modifications produced by these social factors will be the product of 1. the people and settings themselves and 2. the manner in which the individual (with his unique personality and cognitive make-up) acts upon and is acted upon by the persons and settings. This dynamic process continues in such a fashion throughout the aging stage. Whether the person shall remain more or less stable or undergo considerable change during this period is dependent on both 1. the degree of diversity of social factors in his environment and 2. on the individual himself. Also playing their part in this ongoing course are cognitive, neurological, and physical alterations which, as Storck, Looft, and Hooper (1972) have demonstrated, occur in a nonuniform manner in adults. That is, crystallized general intellectual factors (measured by the Stanford-Binet vocabulary subtest) usually remain more intact in the aged than do fluid general intellectual factors (measured by Piagetian tasks of classification and conservation). We may hypothesize that the differential rate at which these two sets of intellectual factors deteriorate in the elderly will have a noteworthy impact on, and cause much indi-

vidual variation in, their ability to adapt to and to organize their surroundings.

Thus the equation becomes ever more complex. Neugarten (1973) appropriately observes with reference to the disengagement theory that "as the individual ages, the factors that influence his behavior do not become fewer; and the investigator who enters the field of aging will not find the research problems simpler" (p. 330). The transactional model offered here certainly does nothing to lessen the complications posed by such research. It will require research in which present behavioral and environmental events assume as much importance as past ones. These contemporary social influences are as specific as an elderly lady's closest relative and as general as the political, cultural, and economic forces at work in the society at large -- forces which themselves are continually in a state of flux over the course of time. In addition, the transactional model will require that, to yield psychological significance, data collected on the aged should be capable of being submitted to multivariate analysis. But these requirements, while making research more difficult and challenging, may aid us in arriving at a more veridical conception and truer appreciation of the diversity and complexity involved in the development of human behavior. As Kluckholm and Murray (1949, p. 35) once commented, "Every man is like all other men, like some other men, and like no other men." This succinct but trenchant remark remains no less true for the elderly man, and woman, than for the rest of us.

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